



STATUS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN RURAL SCHOOLS OF PURBA BARDHAMAN, WEST BENGAL: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Physical education (PE) is a fundamental component of holistic education, contributing to physical fitness, mental well-being, emotional balance, and social development. Despite its recognized importance, the status of physical education in rural areas of West Bengal, particularly in Purba Bardhaman district, remains inadequate. This study examines the current condition of physical education in rural schools, identifies key structural and socio-cultural challenges, and explores future prospects. Using a descriptive qualitative approach supported by field survey data from 20 rural schools, the study reveals significant gaps in infrastructure, shortage of trained physical education teachers, irregular curriculum implementation, and low student participation. Statistical analysis indicates that only 25% of schools conduct regular PE classes, while less than 40% have basic sports facilities. The findings highlight systemic neglect of physical education due to academic prioritization and socio-economic constraints. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasizing the need for institutional reforms, community engagement, and sustainable infrastructure development. This study contributes to localized educational research and provides context-specific and policy-relevant insights for strengthening physical education in rural India.

Keywords: *Physical Education, Rural Education, Purba Bardhaman, School Infrastructure, NEP 2020, Student Participation Holistic Education Rural Schools India*

Introduction

Education in the contemporary context is no longer confined to cognitive development alone; rather, it is increasingly recognized as a holistic process encompassing physical, emotional, and social dimensions. Within this broader framework, physical education (PE) plays a vital role in promoting physical fitness, mental well-being, discipline, teamwork, and resilience among students. It contributes significantly to the overall personality development of learners and supports the creation of a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.

In India, educational policy frameworks such as the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have emphasized the integration of physical education into mainstream schooling. These policies advocate for a balanced approach to education, where physical development is considered as important as academic achievement. However, despite these progressive policy directives, the implementation of physical education across schools remains uneven and inconsistent, particularly in rural areas.

Purba Bardhaman, a district in West Bengal characterized by a predominantly rural population, presents a representative case of this disparity. While there has been notable progress in terms of school enrollment and access to education, challenges related to quality and comprehensive development persist. The educational environment in many rural schools continues to be heavily academic-centric, often prioritizing examination performance over physical and co-curricular development.

As a result, physical education is frequently marginalized within the school system. Several interrelated factors contribute to this situation. These include inadequate infrastructure, such as the absence of proper playgrounds and sports equipment; a shortage of trained physical education teachers; limited awareness among students, parents, and educators regarding the importance of physical activity; and broader socio-economic constraints that restrict access to resources and opportunities.

Given these challenges, it becomes essential to critically examine the current status of physical education in rural schools and identify the underlying issues affecting its implementation. In this context, the present study focuses on rural schools in Purba Bardhaman district to analyze existing conditions and explore feasible strategies for improvement. By providing a localized and

context-specific perspective, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on strengthening physical education within the framework of holistic education in India.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the current status of physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman.
- To assess infrastructure, teacher availability, and student participation.
- To identify key challenges affecting PE implementation.
- To evaluate field-based data for empirical insights.
- To suggest policy-level and practical interventions.

Review of Literature

A review of existing and recent literature reveals that the status of physical education (PE) in rural India is deeply embedded within broader structural, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges affecting the education system. Several studies have consistently highlighted persistent inequalities between urban and rural schooling, particularly in terms of infrastructure, resource allocation, and quality of educational delivery.

Basu (2015) emphasized that rural schools in West Bengal continue to suffer from inadequate infrastructure, including poor classroom conditions, lack of basic facilities, and insufficient space for co-curricular activities. Such infrastructural deficiencies directly hinder the effective implementation of physical education, as the absence of safe and functional playgrounds limits opportunities for structured physical engagement. This concern remains relevant in recent years, as studies continue to show that lack of sports infrastructure and equipment significantly constrains the delivery of PE in rural schools.

Biswas et al. (2020) examined physical activity patterns among rural students and found a significant lack of awareness regarding its importance. Their study revealed that many students perceived physical activity as unnecessary or even detrimental to academic performance, associating it with fatigue and distraction. This misconception reflects a deeper issue of limited health education and inadequate integration of physical education within the school curriculum. Supporting this view, Shirotriya et al. (2023) found that parental attitudes in India often prioritize academic achievement over physical development, further reinforcing the marginal status of physical education in schools.

Large-scale educational surveys such as the *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2021–2024)* continue to point to systemic gaps in rural education, including shortages of trained teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven learning outcomes. Although these reports do not exclusively focus on physical education, their findings indirectly highlight the marginal position of PE within the school system. When foundational academic needs remain unmet, physical education is often deprioritized by institutions as well as stakeholders.

Recent research also underscores the importance of policy implementation in determining the effectiveness of physical education programs. Ausenhus et al. (2023) observed that while schools may formally adopt physical activity policies, their actual implementation depends on factors such as leadership support, resource allocation, and proper utilization of instructional time. This highlights the existence of a significant policy–practice gap, particularly in rural contexts.

Further, international scholarship has begun to examine rural physical education from a broader perspective. Hudson et al. (2025), in a comprehensive review, noted that rural schools worldwide often face resource constraints and limited institutional support. However, the study also emphasized the potential of community engagement and localized strategies in strengthening physical education practices, suggesting pathways that are particularly relevant for rural India.

Socio-cultural factors continue to play a crucial role in shaping participation in physical activities. In many rural communities, traditional norms and gender expectations restrict the involvement of girls in sports and outdoor activities. Concerns related to safety, social appropriateness, and cultural expectations often discourage female participation, leading to persistent gender disparities. Recent discussions also highlight that inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches are essential for improving participation rates and ensuring equitable access to physical education.

Additionally, contemporary perspectives on education increasingly recognize the multidimensional benefits of physical education. Recent analyses suggest that well-structured PE contributes not only to physical health but also to cognitive development, emotional resilience, and social skills. This evolving understanding reinforces the importance of integrating physical education as a core component of holistic education.

Overall, the literature indicates that improving the status of physical education in rural areas requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach. It must address infrastructural deficits, institutional weaknesses, and socio-cultural barriers simultaneously. The present study builds upon these insights by offering a localized analysis of rural schools in Purba Bardhaman, thereby offering a more context-specific and empirically grounded understanding of the issue.

Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the status of physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman district, West Bengal. This approach is appropriate as the study aims to understand existing conditions, identify key challenges, and interpret contextual realities rather than establish causal relationships. The analysis is supported by both primary and secondary data sources to ensure a comprehensive and grounded understanding of the issue.

Data Sources: The study is based on a combination of secondary and primary data sources:

Secondary Data: Secondary information was collected from official databases and reports, including UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education), ASER (Annual Status of Education Report), government publications, and relevant academic literature. These sources provided a macro-level understanding of rural education and the status of physical education.

Primary Data: Primary data were collected through field surveys conducted in selected rural schools of Purba Bardhaman district. These data offered first-hand insights into the actual implementation of physical education at the grassroots level.

Sample Selection: A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the study sample. A total of 20 rural schools were selected from three blocks of Purba Bardhaman district, namely Bhatar, Katwa-I, and Galsi-II. The sample included primary, upper primary, and secondary schools to capture variations across different educational levels.

The selection of these blocks was based on their rural characteristics and their representativeness of the broader district context.

Tools and Techniques of Data Collection: Multiple tools were used to collect and validate the data:

- *Observation Checklist:* A structured observation checklist was used to assess the availability of infrastructure, sports facilities, and the conduct of physical education activities within schools.
- *Informal Interviews:* Informal interactions were conducted with teachers and students to gather qualitative insights regarding attitudes, challenges, and participation in physical education.
- *Participation Assessment:* Student participation in physical activities was observed and categorized to understand engagement levels and patterns, including gender-based differences.

Data Analysis: The collected data were analyzed using descriptive methods. Quantitative data obtained from the field survey were presented in the form of percentages, tables, and graphical representations, while qualitative responses were interpreted thematically. This combined approach enabled a nuanced understanding of both measurable trends and contextual realities.

Measurement and Scaling: All attitudinal and perception-related variables in the study were measured using a five-point Likert scale to ensure consistency and comparability across responses. The scale ranged as follows:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

The use of multiple items to measure perception helped reduce measurement error and improve the internal consistency of responses.

Statistical Analysis: The analysis of the collected data was carried out in a structured manner to align with the objectives of the study, ensuring that each research objective was systematically addressed through appropriate statistical techniques.

To examine the overall status of physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman, descriptive statistical methods were employed. Key indicators such as infrastructure availability, presence of physical education teachers, and frequency of physical education classes were analyzed using percentage distribution. This approach enabled a clear understanding of the existing conditions and helped identify major gaps in the implementation of physical education across schools.

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Frequency}}{\text{Total Sample}} \times 100$$

Further, in order to assess specific components such as infrastructure, teacher availability, and student participation, comparative analysis was conducted using categorized percentage distributions. This allowed for the identification of disparities across different school levels and facilities, thereby providing a more nuanced evaluation of resource availability and participation patterns.

To identify the key challenges affecting the implementation of physical education, qualitative data obtained through informal interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. In addition, perception-based responses from students, teachers, and parents were quantified using Likert scale scoring. The mean score was calculated to determine the overall tendency and intensity of responses related to various challenges.

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

For a deeper empirical understanding of field-based data, measures of dispersion were also applied. Standard deviation was used to assess the variability of responses, indicating the degree of consistency or divergence among different stakeholders and schools.

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (X - \bar{X})^2}{N}}$$

Finally, to ensure the reliability and internal consistency of the perception-based measurement scale, Cornbrash's Alpha coefficient was calculated. This step was essential for validating the consistency of responses and strengthening the credibility of the findings, which further informed the development of policy-level and practical recommendations.

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{(k-1)} \left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma^2 t} \right)$$

Field Survey Data and Statistical Analysis

Infrastructure Availability

Table 1: Infrastructure Availability in Rural Schools

Facility	Number of Schools	Percentage
Playground available	11	55%
Sports equipment available	8	40%
Indoor facility	2	10%
Safe boundary for play	7	35%

Note: The infrastructure data presented in Table 1 indicate that a little over half of the schools (55%) have access to playground facilities, while only 40% possess basic sports equipment. The availability of indoor facilities is extremely limited (10%), reflecting a significant infrastructural gap. Additionally, only 35% of schools have safe boundary arrangements for play, which raises concerns regarding student safety. Overall, the findings highlight a clear imbalance in infrastructure, potentially limiting the effective implementation of physical education activities in rural schools.

Availability of Physical Education Teachers:

Table 2: Availability of Physical Education Teachers by School Level

School Level	Schools with PE Teacher	Percentage
Primary	1/10	10%
Upper Primary	2/6	33%
Secondary	3/4	75%

Note: The Availability data presented in Table 2 indicate a clear disparity in the availability of physical education teachers across different school levels. Only 10% of primary schools have designated PE teachers, indicating severe neglect at the foundational level of education. The situation improves slightly at the upper primary level (33%), while secondary schools show comparatively better availability (75%). This hierarchical imbalance suggests that younger students are the most deprived of structured physical education, which may have long-term implications for their physical development and engagement in sports.

Frequency of Physical Education Classes

Table 3: Frequency of Physical Education Classes

Frequency	Schools	Percentage
Regular	5	25%
Occasional	9	45%
Rare	6	30%

Note. The Frequency data presented in Table 3 indicate that only 25% of schools conduct physical education classes regularly, while the majority conduct them either occasionally (45%) or rarely (30%). This suggests that physical education is not systematically integrated into the school routine. The irregular scheduling reflects low institutional priority and limits consistent student engagement in physical activities.

Student Participation: The level of student participation in physical education activities varies significantly across schools, reflecting irregular implementation and varying degrees of engagement.

Table 4: Student Participation in Physical Education Activities

Participation Level	Percentage (%)
Regular	30%
Occasional	45%
None	25%

Note: The student participation data presented in Table 4 indicate that only 30% of students participate regularly in physical education activities, whereas 45% participate occasionally and 25% do not participate at all. This pattern highlights a significant

gap in engagement, indicating that physical education activities are conducted inconsistently. The relatively high proportion of occasional participation suggests the absence of structured and regular programs.

Gender-Based Participation:

Table 5: Gender-Based Participation in Physical Education

Gender	Regular Participation
Boys	60%
Girls	40%

Note: The Gender data presented in Table 5 reveal a noticeable gender disparity in participation, with boys (60%) participating more regularly than girls (40%). This difference reflects the influence of socio-cultural norms, safety concerns, and limited encouragement for girls in rural areas. The findings underscore the need for gender-inclusive strategies to promote equal participation in physical education.

Attitudinal Analysis

Table 6: Attitudinal Analysis towards Physical Education among Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Students	60%	25%	15%
Teachers	50%	30%	20%
Parents	35%	40%	25%

Note: The Attitudinal data presented in Table 6 indicate the students hold relatively positive views toward physical education (60%), while teachers show moderate positivity (50%). In contrast, parents demonstrate comparatively lower positive attitudes (35%) and a higher neutral response (40%), reflecting limited awareness regarding the importance of physical education. The variation in perceptions among stakeholders highlights the need for awareness and sensitization initiatives.

Present Status of Physical Education in Rural Schools of Purba Bardhaman

The present condition of physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman reflects structural inadequacy and functional inconsistency. Although policies recognize physical education as essential for holistic development, its actual implementation at the grassroots level remains fragmented and weak.

Field observations and secondary data reveal that physical education is not institutionalized as a regular pedagogical practice. Instead, it is often treated as an auxiliary or optional activity rather than a core component of school education.

Infrastructure Deficiency: One of the most critical challenges is the lack of adequate infrastructure. Many rural schools do not have designated playgrounds, which severely restricts opportunities for organized physical activities.

Even in schools where playgrounds exist, they are often poorly maintained. Uneven surfaces and lack of proper care make them unsafe and unsuitable for regular use.

In addition, school grounds are frequently shared with the local community for social gatherings, agricultural purposes, or public events. This shared usage limits student access and disrupts the continuity of physical education activities.

The shortage of essential sports equipment further worsens the situation. Basic materials such as balls, nets, and athletic gear are either insufficient or entirely absent. As a result, structured physical education activities are rarely conducted, and engagement becomes informal and irregular.

Teacher Constraints: The shortage of qualified physical education teachers is another major issue. Most rural primary schools do not have designated PE instructors, and general subject teachers are assigned this responsibility without proper training.

This lack of expertise leads to unstructured sessions without clear objectives or progression. Students often show low engagement due to the absence of skill-based and innovative activities.

Safety is also a concern, as untrained teachers may not be equipped to handle physical risks or provide appropriate guidance during exercises.

At the secondary level, although some schools have physical education teachers, their numbers are insufficient. Moreover, administrative duties often limit their active involvement in organizing regular sports activities.

Curriculum Marginalization: Physical education continues to be marginalized within the school curriculum. Although it is officially included, its practical implementation remains inconsistent and often neglected.

In many cases, PE periods are treated as free periods, where no structured activities take place. This reflects a lack of seriousness toward the subject.

During examination periods or times of academic pressure, PE classes are frequently replaced by core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language studies. This substitution highlights the dominance of an academic-centric mindset.

The absence of proper assessment mechanisms further reduces the importance of physical education. Since it has little impact on academic evaluation, both teachers and students tend to deprioritize it. Consequently, key objectives such as fitness, teamwork, and emotional development remain unfulfilled.

Major Issues and Challenges

The implementation of physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman is affected by structural, institutional, socio-cultural, and economic factors. These challenges are interconnected and collectively contribute to its marginalization.

Structural Challenges: Structural limitations form the foundation of the problem. A large number of schools lack basic facilities such as playgrounds, sports equipment, and safe activity spaces.

Even when infrastructure exists, poor maintenance limits its usability. This reduces the effectiveness of physical education programs.

Limited financial allocation is another major concern. Rural schools prioritize essential academic resources, leaving minimal funding for physical education.

There is also a significant gap between policy formulation and implementation. Although policies emphasize physical education, their execution at the grassroots level remains weak due to lack of accountability and localized planning.

Institutional Challenges: Institutional factors play a key role in limiting effective implementation. The shortage of trained physical education teachers remains a critical issue, especially at the primary level.

In addition, there is a lack of monitoring and supervision. Physical education programs are rarely evaluated by school authorities or district-level bodies.

Weak curriculum enforcement further contributes to the problem. Schools often do not follow prescribed guidelines, and there is little accountability for non-compliance.

Socio-Cultural Barriers: Socio-cultural factors strongly influence participation in physical education. Academic pressure is one of the dominant challenges, as parents and teachers prioritize examination performance over physical activities.

Gender bias is another significant issue. In many rural areas, girls face restrictions in participating in sports due to traditional norms and safety concerns. This results in unequal participation.

Low parental awareness about the benefits of physical education also limits student involvement. Many parents do not fully understand its role in promoting health, discipline, and cognitive development.

Economic Constraints: Economic challenges significantly affect participation in physical education. Many students come from low-income families, where financial hardship limits their involvement in school activities.

Some students are required to assist in household or agricultural work, reducing their time and energy for physical activities. Irregular attendance further affects their participation.

Access to sports resources is also limited. Families often cannot afford equipment, proper footwear, or uniforms, and schools lack the funds to provide these necessities.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal that physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman remains structurally marginalized within the broader educational framework. Despite formal recognition in policy documents, its implementation at the grassroots level is inconsistent and often negligible.

The synthesis of field survey data and existing literature indicates a persistent pattern of systemic neglect, shaped by institutional limitations, socio-cultural attitudes, and economic constraints. This reflects a significant disconnect between policy intent and practical execution.

Key Findings

The empirical data highlight several critical concerns. Only about 25% of schools conduct physical education classes on a regular basis, suggesting that structured physical activity is absent in most institutions.

Less than 40% of schools have access to basic sports infrastructure, including playgrounds and essential equipment, which significantly restricts the scope of organized activities.

The shortage of trained physical education teachers is particularly acute at the primary level, where most schools rely on general teachers without specialized training.

Gender disparity in participation is also evident, with girls engaging less frequently due to socio-cultural constraints and limited encouragement.

Collectively, these findings indicate that physical education is not integrated as a core component of the schooling process but is treated as a peripheral or supplementary activity.

Discussion

The findings point to a deeper structural issue characterized by a clear policy–practice gap. While frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasize holistic development and the integration of physical education, these principles are not effectively translated into practice at the school level.

This gap is driven by multiple interrelated factors. The absence of accountability mechanisms allows institutions to deprioritize physical education without institutional repercussions.

Resource constraints, both financial and human, further limit the effective implementation of physical education programs. In addition, the prevailing academic-centric culture reinforces the perception of physical education as secondary to core academic subjects.

Socio-cultural norms continue to shape participation patterns, particularly for girls, who face restrictions in accessing physical activities. This has broader implications for their physical, social, and psychological development.

Moreover, the convergence of infrastructural deficits, teacher shortages, and economic limitations creates a cumulative disadvantage. This convergence of challenges perpetuates a cycle of neglect, further weakening the position of physical education in rural schools.

Implications of the Findings

The study underscores the need to reconceptualize physical education as an integral component of quality education rather than an optional activity.

It also highlights the importance of localized planning and context-specific strategies to address rural disparities effectively.

A multi-level approach is essential, involving stronger policy enforcement, institutional capacity building, and enhanced community awareness. Without such integrated interventions, the vision of holistic education is unlikely to be realized.

Conclusion

The study concludes that physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman is at a critical juncture. Although policy frameworks, particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasize its importance, implementation challenges persist at the grassroots level.

Physical education remains structurally weak and functionally marginalized due to inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained personnel, and limited institutional commitment. These challenges are further compounded by socio-cultural attitudes and economic constraints.

However, increasing awareness of health, well-being, and holistic development, along with emerging policy initiatives, presents opportunities for reform.

With systematic planning, adequate resource allocation, and active community engagement, physical education can evolve into a meaningful contributor to student development in rural contexts.

In this regard, strengthening physical education is not only an educational priority but also a broader social and public health imperative, requiring coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the status of physical education in rural schools of Purba Bardhaman:

1. *Appointment of Qualified Physical Education Teachers:* There is an urgent need to recruit and deploy trained physical education teachers, particularly at the primary and upper primary levels, to ensure the structured and effective delivery of physical education programs.
2. *Development of Low-Cost and Sustainable Infrastructure:* Schools should be provided with basic playground facilities and essential sports equipment. Emphasis should be placed on low-cost, locally adaptable, and sustainable solutions to address resource constraints.
3. *Integration of Physical Education into the Daily School Schedule:* Physical education should be made a compulsory and regular component of the school timetable. Clear institutional guidelines must be established to prevent its substitution by academic subjects.
4. *Promotion of Gender-Inclusive Sports Programs:* Targeted initiatives should be undertaken to promote the participation of girls in physical activities by addressing socio-cultural barriers and ensuring a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment.
5. *Awareness and Sensitization Programs for Parents and Community:* Awareness campaigns should be organized to educate parents and community members about the importance of physical education in the holistic development of children and to encourage active support.
6. *Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms:* District-level education authorities should establish systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure effective implementation of physical education programs and adherence to policy guidelines.

7. *Integration of Indigenous and Traditional Games*: Schools should actively promote indigenous and traditional games such as Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and other local sports. These activities require minimal resources, are culturally relevant, and can enhance student participation and sustainability.

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